

## SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST RECREATION SITE ANALYSIS Q&As

- *Q: What is the Recreation Site Analysis (RSA)?*
- A: The Recreation Site Analysis (RSA) is an assessment of every developed recreation site on each National Forest in the USFS Rocky Mountain Region with a focus on balancing the social, environmental and financial elements to build a sustainable developed recreation program into the future. The steps in the analysis process are described in detail in the Draft RSA Plan of Work (POW).
  
- *Q: What is the Purpose of the RSA?*
- A: The purpose is to provide a consistent and objective process for the Region's Forests to evaluate how best to provide quality and sustainable recreation opportunities in the long run. Developed site benefits and costs are evaluated in consideration of the effects on the rest of the recreation programs, such as Wilderness and heritage program management, administration of outfitter/guide and ski area permits, motor vehicle use, visitor information, and other recreation services. The result of RSA will be a 5-year POW for each Forest that will prioritize developed sites for investment, service changes, deferred maintenance, improvements, decommissioning and other actions. Actions in the POW are intended to reduce operations and maintenance costs, maximize public benefits, while balancing social, economic and environmental factors.
  
- *Q: What are the specific Objectives of the RSA?*
- A: The objectives are to:
  - Operate high-quality sites on the Forest while increasing operational efficiency by: leveraging concession, volunteers, grants, youth and veteran corps, and fees, where practical.
  - Decrease recreation site deferred maintenance backlogs by 20% over the next 5 years.
  - Identify sites and constructed features to close/decommission based on conditions such as: low rank on the prioritized list of sites, poor facility condition, high level of deferred maintenance, high cost per visitor, low occupancy, and low potential for resource damage if the site is closed.
  - Identify sites and site features to repair/replace/reconstruct based on conditions such as: middle-higher rank on the prioritized list of sites, moderate DM, low service cost per visitor, moderate to high occupancy, designated high value special site category, high potential to protect resources long term.
  - Bring all Forest recreation sites conditions up to agency standards for quality and public health and safety within the five-year POW period.
  
- *Q: What does the RSA propose?*
- A: The RSA Program of Work recommends improvements, a variety of changes, or no changes for each of the San Juan National Forest's 129 developed recreation sites. The

RSA evaluates a broad spectrum of possible changes at sites, from closure to complete redevelopment, to construction of new sites.

- *Q: What is the goal of the RSA process?*

A: Create a more sustainable developed recreation program:

- To enable us to focus limited resources on our highest priority sites and facilities and reduce our operating costs and deferred maintenance burden.
- To provide a foundation for regional and national support of R2 National Forests when planned program changes are implemented.
- Invest in a facility only if it can be financially sustained in the long-term.
- To update agency site databases prior to and throughout the planning and implementation phases to improve future cost evaluations and data accuracy.
- To inform and involve the community throughout the process and provide all stakeholders an opportunity to participate in the effort.
- Encourage constituents to become active participants in Forest stewardship.

- *Q: Why are changes necessary to the San Juan National Forest's recreation facilities?*

A: The San Juan's overall recreation budget today is about half what it was a decade ago, even without factoring in inflation. Adjustments to balance available budget and staffing with management needs are long overdue. While the RSA evaluates just the developed recreation site portfolio and recommends actions that will allow the agency to provide safe and sustainable facilities, other components of the recreation program must also utilize the same funding. When coupled with continually increasing operations and maintenance costs, the Forest faces decreasing capacity to manage all aspects of the Forest's recreation program such as wilderness and heritage program management, administration of outfitter/guide and ski area permits, motor vehicle use, visitor information and other recreation services. The RSA prioritizes the San Juan's 129 recreational facilities by balancing visitor needs with management costs and other factors. The goal is to manage facilities to standard and within budget without sacrificing the quality of facilities and services, public safety, or creating unacceptable impacts to natural resources.

- *Q: How can management capacity be determined, when budgets cannot be predicted?*

A: The RSA is based upon the best available budget projections which currently project steady or slightly declining annual recreation budgets. In the event budgets rebound unexpectedly, this analysis will put the San Juan in an excellent position to put any unexpected funds to work on those projects that mean the most to the public.

- *Q: How will community perspectives be integrated into the RSA?*

A: Initial public outreach for this administrative effort was conducted in the spring of 2015, including news releases, media coverage, editorials, a public workshop, and in-

person meetings with key stakeholders, groups, and local government officials. Next, site priority rankings and preliminary site recommendations were shared with interested stakeholders and local governments. Finally, the public will have an opportunity to review and provide feedback on the Draft POW during January and February of 2016. Substantive feedback received to date has helped the agency develop strategies that support community needs and still meet RSA objectives.

- *Q: Could priorities shift as a result of public and community input?*

A: Site rankings and how/if sites are managed in the future may shift as a result of public feedback, but projected agency funding and resources will still constrain the total number of sites and services the National Forest can provide into the future.

- *Q: The Plan of Work mentions Special Recreation Sites. What are these?*

A: These are special categories of sites that have unique attributes or characteristics that may warrant retention and possible future investment, regardless of their initial ranking. Please refer to the Draft Plan of Work for additional information.

The Special Recreation Site categories include:

- Signature Tourism Site (ST)
  - Signature Local Site (SL)
  - Resource Protection Site (RP)
  - Significant Cultural/Historical/Paleo Site (CH)
  - National and Major Visitor Centers (VC)
  - Scenic Byway Related (SB)
- *Q: How was a site's importance to the local community decided?*
- A: Placing a value on the importance of a site to local communities was initially determined through staff knowledge of the facilities and use patterns. A scoring system was developed. Public feedback is helping the agency balance internal evaluations with public needs and desires, to the extent practical.
- *Q: How will this process affect tourism?*

A: The RSA focuses on reducing site management costs without sacrificing the opportunity offered by the National Forest's developed recreation sites. The process strives to retain the primary recreation opportunity offered at a site, while determining whether all specific facilities or features (toilets, tables, parking, signs, etc.) are critical. The RSA also addresses whether current levels of service/patrol are adequate to maintain sites in a healthy, safe, and functional condition.

- *Q: How much weight is given to a site's relationship to supporting a scenic byway?*

A: Many scenic overlooks and other facilities were constructed along the San Juan Skyway after its designation in 1988 as the first National Forest Scenic Byway in Colorado. The agency is evaluating these sites to determine how each supports the scenic byway as a tourist attraction. The goal is to ensure the Byway's roadside facilities are sustainable in the long-term and that the facilities mesh with the opportunities provided by each site. According to the San Juan NF 2011 Visitor Use Monitoring results, driving for pleasure is the fifth most popular recreational activity on the National Forest, behind hiking, wildlife viewing, and scenic landscape viewing. An objective of the RSA is to ensure recreation facilities compliment such trends in recreational use.

- *Q: How is a site's role in the sustainability of community economies factored in?*

A: RSA evaluations take into account social, environmental and economic values of specific sites to provide context of their importance and potential for long-term sustainability. Twelve questions are answered for each site, resulting in a ranking from 12 (lowest) to 60 (highest). Although the rankings are useful for prioritizing sites and maintaining consistency in applying RSA principles across the Forest, the rankings are not binding as to decision-making.

- *Q: How did the RSA determine projected visitor demands and costs?*

A: Field observations, campground occupancy rates, and trailhead registration data over the last few years has not shown any dramatic changes (or obvious trends) in visitation to the San Juan NF. The 2011 National Visitor Use Monitoring results from the San Juan were also reviewed and factored into the RSA process as appropriate. Cost projections used in the RSA are calculated and updated in the agency's facility database (INFRA), and the numbers used in this process will be consistent across the National Forest System.

- *Q: What is the San Juan National Forest's niche statement?*

A: The San Juan NF Land and Resource Management Plan calls for managing recreation to offer diverse, dispersed forms of recreation across expansive, unencumbered landscapes. Although the San Juan features a few high-end developed facilities, its greatest recreational values are found in more primitive backcountry settings. The Forest's recreation niche statement reads: *"Maintain and enhance opportunities for dispersed and backcountry recreational experiences that rely little on developed facilities. To that end, focus recreation resources on a limited number of developed sites that directly or indirectly support dispersed and backcountry types of recreation on the Forest."* The niche statement was initially developed in advance of the 2008 Recreation Facility Analysis, a process similar to this one. The niche statement serves as an overall

guide for the future of the recreation program, but it is not formally binding under agency policy or law.

- *Q: How was the desirability of a site determined?*

A: The desirability criteria included a site's adjacency to water or other unique attractions as one measure, with the other primary measure being proximity to other recreational opportunities (trails, scenic views, historical features, etc.). The evaluation criteria used are available to those interested in learning more about the process.

- *Q: What is an example of a gateway recreation site on the National Forest?*

A: Specific examples of gateway sites on the San Juan include Vallecito, Williams and Teal campgrounds, and the McPhee Recreation Complex, all of which are used by visitors to access adjacent popular areas and attractions.

- *Q: Are there outside funding sources that can help the agency manage recreation sites?*

A: Examples of external funding sources include fees from special-use permits and concessionaire programs, federal/state/local grants, and in-kind or other contributions from partner groups. Other providers could also include local government partners, community clubs/groups, or individuals contributing as volunteers.

- *Q: How were a site's significant investment needs determined?*

A: Site-condition surveys are conducted regularly and maintenance needs recorded in the agency's facility database. These numbers are used to help determine if continued investment is justified, or whether a site needs changes to make it economically or environmentally sustainable.

- *Q: Do the RSA's recommendations take impacts to natural resources into account?*

A: Yes, recreation sites that cannot be maintained to standards because of budget or funding short falls risk suffering unacceptable impacts to natural resources, including erosion from vegetation loss, issues with human waste, damage to trees or other natural features, off-road vehicle use, etc. The RSA seeks to balance workloads to make sure all recreation facilities can be managed to standards.

- *Q: Does the RSA propose environmental, health or safety mitigations for those sites with current problems?*

A: It is critical to note that public health and safety are paramount in site management and cannot be compromised. Routine condition surveys will continue to be conducted

for all facilities to prioritize safety-related issues. The RSA proposes mitigation measures for some sites, including safety measures within floodplains, removal of hazardous trees, repair or removal of deteriorated facilities, etc. For example, if staff cannot service a toilet adequately or frequently enough, closure and removal of toilet facilities can improve public health and safety. In addition, floodplain delineation will determine if part or all of any sites are at risk of flooding, and site adjustments would be made accordingly.

- *Q: What standards and guidelines will guide implementation of RSA recommendations?*

A: Standards and guidelines for site management are covered in other existing Forest Service regulations and policies. The RSA is designed to help the Forest meet these standards and guidelines by balancing management needs of developed recreation sites with available staffing and budget. A Forest-wide National Environmental Policy Act analysis will be conducted during the winter/spring of 2016 to address any significant site alterations proposed in the Final RSA Program of Work.

- *How long will current funding allocation models remain valid?*

A: The RSA is based on the best available projections of agency budgets and available resources over the next five years. If the budget were to improve (rather than decline as anticipated) over the next five years, the RSA process will still put the Forest in a better position to address maintenance backlogs that exist in many program areas. The agency could divert any unexpected additional funding to deferred maintenance projects, and may not need to implement all the cost-savings measures proposed.

- *Q: Were RSA recommendations for cutbacks and/or downgrades evaluated as to possible repercussions?*

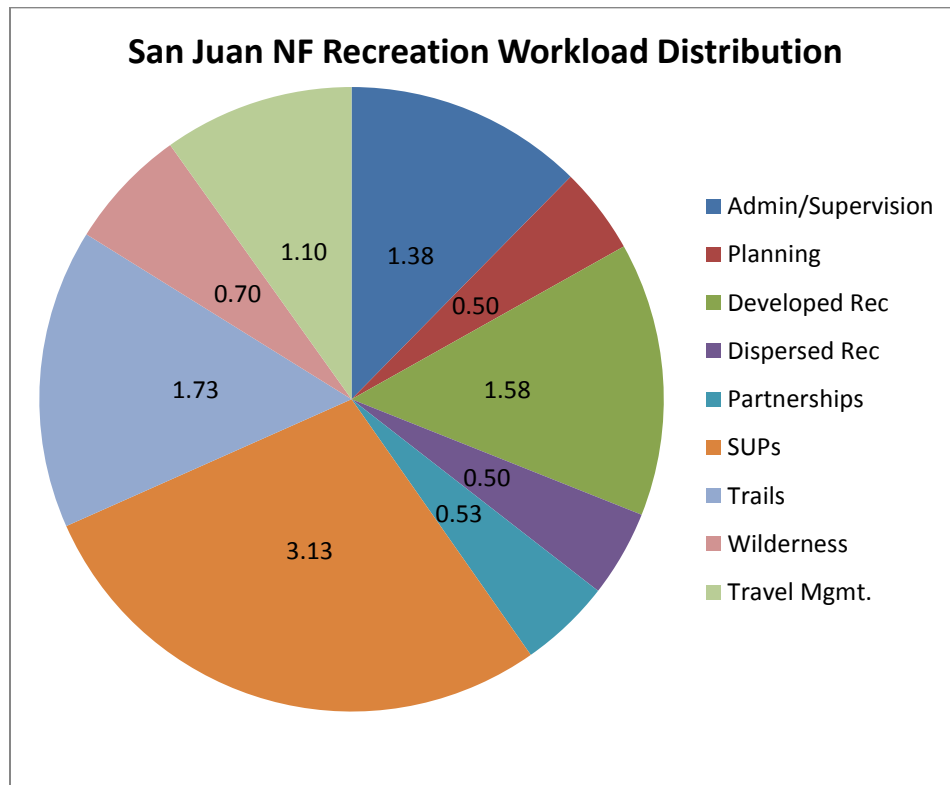
A: Yes, closing or significantly altering some sites may have unintended consequences that are being evaluated prior to implementation. Many sites were originally developed to meet a need evidenced by use patterns and impacts to specific areas. The RSA weighed the pros and cons of retaining, changing, or decommissioning certain amenities to make sure facilities can continue to accommodate use and reduce impacts to acceptable levels.

- *Q: Will other recreation services, such as trails maintenance, outfitter-guides, special use permits and special events programs also need to be put in line with budget?*

A: Trails and Special Uses will be the next two program areas to be evaluated to ensure a sustainable program in those areas.

- *Q: How are recreation duties covered by staff now on the San Juan NF?*

A: The numbers embedded within the pie chart below refer to “full time equivalents” which is basically a full-time 40-hour per week job. As of 2014, the Forest has about 11 full-time equivalents, although some variation in that figure year-to-year is normal due to the Forest’s “permanent part-time” positions, which can vary from 1,039 to about 2,000 hours per year.



Notes: SUPs = special use permits, Dispersed Rec = Recreation uses not associated with developed recreation sites.

- *Q: What is the difference between operating vs maintenance costs?*

A: Operating costs include toilet cleaning, trash pickup, patrols, and other daily duties. Maintenance costs include repairing doors, re-roofing buildings, grading/gravelling parking areas, etc. The agency often combines these figures because the total annual cost of operating each site is what is most important in the RSA context.

- *Q: How can the SJNF afford the cost of decommissioning some sites when budgets are so tight?*

A: The USFS Washington Office will be providing \$250,000 for implementation of facility-related actions in 2016. It is our intent to use that funding to the fullest extent to implement the more significant (and more costly) projects called for in the RSA Plan of Work.

- *Q: How is the permanence of decommissioning balanced with a future that cannot be fully predicted? What if a popular site is closed and removed, and budgets rebound?*

A: This conundrum is very difficult to eliminate entirely. However, by design, RSA outcomes are designed to minimize impacts to our highest value and highest-use sites on the Forest. It is critical to keep in mind that changing public demands are being incorporated in this process, and none of the 23 sites recommended for complete closure/decommissioning were highly ranked or in the high-use category.

- *Q: How will implementation be balanced with ongoing changing conditions and efforts, such as planning for the Hermosa Special Management Area and Chimney Rock National Monument?*

A: Actions proposed in the RSA are designed to not supersede or conflict with other planning decisions affecting recreation. Related planning efforts/decisions will be completed and considered before any irreversible RSA recommendations at these sites are implemented.

- *Q: What are the roles of the Recreation Enhancement Act and the Recreation Resource Advisory Council (RRAC)?*

A: The RRAC will not be formally engaged in the RSA process unless new fees are proposed under Recreation Enhancement Act authority. Fee proposals under Granger-Thye Authority (Concessions) are not subject to RRAC review or approval. However, the RSA process is being conducted in a transparent manner to ensure the public and other constituents are aware of any proposed fee changes on the Forest.

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